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Review of Ethics and the Golden Rule by Henry J. Gensler

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Harry J. Gensler

Ethics and the Golden Rule.

New York: Routledge 2013.

248 pages

\$125.00 (Hardback ISBN 9780415806862)

The goal of *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, Harry J. Gensler says, is to defend the Golden Rule - roughly, "treat others as you want them to treat you." This rule - accepted by most cultures and religions according to Gensler - is a practical moral rule; but the author contends that it is often dismissed by scholars as a vague principle that, when followed, leads quite easily to absurdities.

This book is comprised of 14 chapters, and broken into four sections. The first section is comprised of two introductions - literally: "Chapter 1: Simpler Introduction" and "Chapter 2: Harder Introduction," both of which cover the same material and use most of the same terminology. Chapter 2 is more technical and contains an extra objection to the golden rule not found in the previous chapter. The remaining chapters are intended to be standalone chapters, although the final two chapters - 13 and 14 - are technical and assume that the reader has read Chapter 2.

Section two is comprised of three chapters. Chapter 3 focuses on research about the history of the Golden Rule in various religions. Chapter 4 is a "Socratic dialogue" summarizing Gensler's thinking about the Golden Rule, but he cautions us that its main character - Socrates - shouldn't be confused with either the historical Socrates, or the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. Chapter 5 is a "Golden Rule Chronology" that starts off on a rather dry joke. I'm not sure how seriously to take this chapter, but 30 pages is quite a lot to waste on a gag or gimmick.

Section three is comprised of four chapters about the application of the golden rule. Section four, also four chapters long, focuses on a number of variations of the Golden Rule and philosophical objections to the Golden Rule.

Throughout the book Gensler abbreviates "Golden Rule" as GR - certainly a measure to save space, but this is particularly confusing since Gensler uses the term "Golden Rule" or "GR" as a catch all term for any formulation of the rule he happens to be using at the time. In the first two pages of chapter 1 Gensler gives two different and inconsistent formulations of the rule "Treat others as you want to be treated" (1) and "Gold 1: Gensler's GR: Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation" (2). The first page of chapter 2 gives us three additional formulations of the rule in the first paragraph and no means to distinguish between them (9). A footnote later in the chapter gives us three different phrases that are sometimes confused for "GR" (28).

Because Gensler views this book as, first and foremost, a defense of the Golden Rule, I think it is appropriate to judge its success in terms of how it responds to the common objections to the rule, each called a "fallacy" by Gensler. The remainder of this review will be an analysis of Gensler's account of these "fallacies" and his defense of the golden rule.

The first objection that Gensler discusses is what he calls the "Literal GR Fallacy." One commits this fallacy when one treats others (literally) as one would like to be treated. To illustrate, Gensler tells a story about a monkey who pulls a fish out of water, thinking "I wouldn't want to be stuck in the water." The story does not end well for the fish. The problem, Gensler says, is that the monkey takes "GR" literally.

This is absurd. The problem with the Golden Rule isn't that it shouldn't be taken literally, it's that the formulation of the Golden Rule that the monkey acts on is a bad formulation that fails to capture the relevant moral features of the situation. "Treat others as you want to be treated" may capture our moral intuitions in some cases, but it fails spectacularly in arguably most cases, as does Gold 1. An acceptable formulation of the Golden Rule that easily avoids most of objections might look something like this "Treat others as you (currently) want to be treated if you were ever in their situation."

If you were in the fish's situation *of course* you wouldn't want to be removed from the water because you need to be in water to survive.

This formulation also matches up with our intuitions in the following case (what Gensler calls the "Soft GR Fallacy") (4):

The Drug Addict Case:

A drug addict requests that you steal pills and give them to her so that she can satisfy her addiction. If the proper formulation of the Golden Rule was Gensler's "GR", "Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation," then of course if we were addicts in this situation who had *just asked* for pills to satisfy our addiction, it's a safe bet we would consent to our request being fulfilled, and the principle requires that we steal pills for the addict (2). Gensler contends that we've committed a fallacy here because we've "asked the GR question wrongly;" instead we ought to ask if we are currently willing to consent to being treated as we would like were we in that situation (5).

Of course the problem here isn't that we've somehow asked the wrong question. The problem - again - is that the formulation or formulations of the Golden Rule Gensler is using is/are inconsistent with our intuitions. In contrast, according to the formulation I propose, you should treat people as you currently want them to treat you were you to find yourself in that situation, not how you would want them to treat you when you are in that situation. The difference is subtle, but important - as a drug addict, of course you want people to supply you drugs, but right now - as you're reading this - I suspect that you wouldn't want people to supply you drugs if you were addicted; rather you'd prefer they help you break your addiction. While addicted, of course, your will is in an important sense not your own, and thus you're not yourself. You ought to help the drug addict break her addiction because that's how you (at present) would want people to treat you in that situation.

Rather than offer a substantive defense of the Golden Rule, Gensler spends the few portions of the book purportedly devoted to defending the moral principle making excuses for it without committing himself to any particular formulation of the principle. It's one thing not to take one's self too seriously - and Gensler peppers this book with the occasional joke or light hearted story - but this book isn't so much funny as it is egregiously sloppy.

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